

June 27, 2016
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Region 4 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Liberty County Conservation District; Gail Cicon
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
Bureau of Reclamation, Tiber Dam Field Office
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a project that intends to restore and stabilize an eroding bank and create trout habitat through the use of engineered log jams and willow lifts on the Marias River, downstream of Tiber Dam. The project would also allow high flows to be released from the dam, which are necessary for pallid sturgeon recovery. The Marias River is located in north central Montana in Liberty County.

Please submit any comments by July 27, 2016 at 11:59 P.M. to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michelle McGree", followed by a horizontal line.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Marias River Sanford Park Fish Habitat Enhancement

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward the restoration and stabilization of an eroding bank on the Marias River and the creation of trout habitat through the use of engineered log jams and willow lifts, which would permit high flow dam releases (that are necessary for pallid sturgeon recovery). The overall goals are to provide trout habitat, improve fishing, prevent further erosion, and create an environment where high dam releases are possible, thereby improving conditions for native fish.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on the Marias River, a tributary to the Missouri River, located approximately 19 miles Southwest of Chester, within Township 30N Range 5E, Section 33 in Liberty County (Figure 1). The project site is located in the tailwater area of Tiber Dam.

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species." This project should reduce erosion in the project that is exacerbated by high spring pulse discharges of up to 5,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) that have been implemented for federally listed endangered pallid sturgeon and other warmwater native fish. Work in the mid-2000's by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with FWP and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) indicated discharges of 4,000 to 5,000 cfs are channel-forming flows in the Marias River. The ability of the USBR to continue to allow high flows out of Tiber Dam should benefit all fish species in the Lower Marias River, including several species of special concern and the federally endangered pallid sturgeon.

Another goal within FWP's Statewide Fisheries Management Plan for the fisheries management program is to "restore and enhance degraded fisheries habitats." By implementing an improvement project and creating/restoring important habitat, this proposed project would help meet this goal. The

project site, located immediately below Tiber dam, does not have recruitment of woody debris or sediment found in natural systems. Engineered log jams are very appropriate at this project site; these structures will increase available trout habitat and provide cover. This project addresses both goals for native species improvement and also enhances a reach of the Marias River that currently has limited habitat for trout and burbot.

III. Scope of the Project:

The Marias River (Liberty County) is located in north central Montana and is impounded by Tiber dam. Wild brown trout, stocked rainbow trout, and burbot are located within the project area, approximately one mile downstream of Tiber dam. This project would restore approximately 360 feet of eroding bank with a 3-tiered willow soil lift, re-grade an additional 40 feet of bank to improve stability, and add two engineered log jams to provide trout habitat through pool scour and cover. The goal is to provide trout habitat and prevent further erosion. The project is located at a public campground. A second goal of the project is to stabilize the bank so that high flow dam releases, which are necessary for pallid sturgeon recovery, are possible and do not lead to further bank erosion. This project is expected to cost \$49,973. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to \$15,075 to complete the project.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Tiber technical committee		\$19,244
USBR (Bureau of Reclamation)		\$16,454
TOTAL = \$35,698.00		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: Marias River Sanford Park fish habitat enhancement

Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)

Description of Project: To restore and stabilize an eroding bank and the create of trout habitat through the use of engineered log jams on the Marias River, downstream of Tiber Dam. The project would also allow high flows to be released from the dam, which are necessary for pallid sturgeon recovery.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species			X			X
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects			X			X
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation			X			X
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

3. Water quality

This project will temporarily impact water quality during construction. Long term, the project site should benefit from reduced erosion.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

This project will temporarily impact the vegetation in the immediate area for staging, mobilization of equipment, and construction; however, long term benefits are expected. The project site will be revegetated or restored to meet or exceed pre-construction conditions. The project will repair an eroding bank with a natural, vegetative treatment, thereby increasing the net amount of vegetation and vegetative cover in the project area. The treatments use will be appropriate for the site, and have a positive impact on the stream and riparian area.

7. Terrestrial and aquatic life habitats.

Construction activities that will affect terrestrial and aquatic life habitats will be short term and involve the installation of the willow soil lift and engineered log jams. Because the majority of the construction will occur in a confined area at the bank of the Marias River, the impact to aquatic life is expected to be minimal. Long term, this project should increase aquatic habitats, and reduce a significant source of erosion.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species.

This project will affect pallid sturgeon, federally identified as endangered and a “Species of Concern” in Montana. The impacts are predicted to be positive, maintaining or increasing survival of these species. This project will also benefit several other native including blue sucker, sauger and shovelnose sturgeon.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

Long term, this project could increase the abundance of trout and burbot in the immediate area due to an increase in available habitat. Additionally, dam releases that encourage pallid sturgeon recovery will be possible because potential streambank erosion has been reduced. This could result in an increased abundance of both native and non-native fish in the Marias River and Missouri River system.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

1. Noise

The project involves use of diesel-powered equipment which emits exhaust and can be loud. Campers may be disturbed during the four-day construction period, due to the noise and odors generated from this project. Any disturbance would be short term and minor.

7. Aesthetics and recreation.

This project will restore and stabilize an eroding bank at an established campground. Willow soil lifts and engineered log jams will be used as treatments. Because the actively eroding bank will be restored with natural treatments, aesthetics are expected to improve. Additionally, the treatment will improve safety at the campground and ensure that no additional land (currently used for recreation) is lost. Fishing access to the shoreline in the project vicinity is expected to improve due to the elimination of the steep, vertical bank.

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of this project and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of the Marias River would continue to erode, threatening a public campground and the ability to produce flows appropriate for pallid sturgeon recovery.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore an eroding bank on the Marias River downstream of Tiber Dam, which is intended to create additional fish habitat and allow dam releases to be high enough to contribute to pallid sturgeon recovery.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks: 124 permit; 318 permit
U. S. Bureau of Reclamation: special use permit
U. S. Army Corps of Engineers: 404 permit
Liberty County Conservation District
Tiber Technical Committee

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be

distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: www.fwp.mt.gov.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 P.M. on July 27th, 2016.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue, P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620

Telephone: (406) 444-2432, E-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

Contributor: Anne Tews and Jonathan Ferree, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

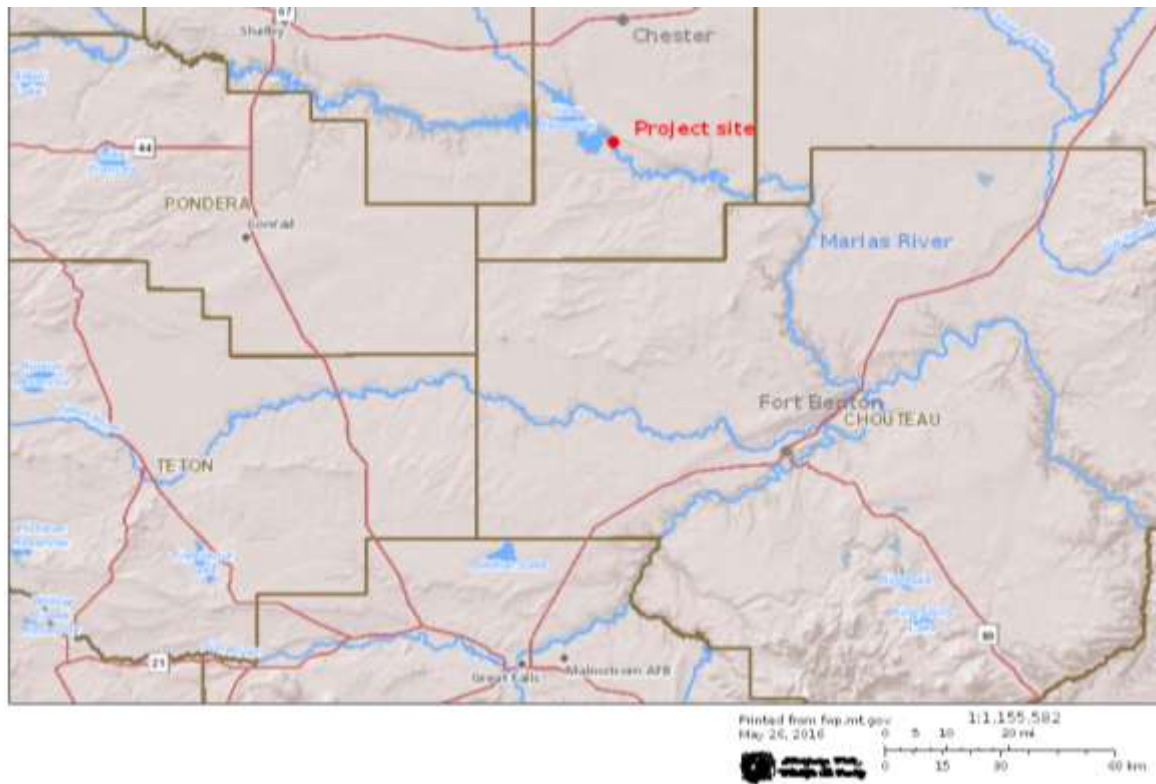


FIGURE 1: project location